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ABSTRACT

The 10 journal articles and documents annotated in this bibliography cover various aspects of the controversy provoked by the emergence of the back-to-basics movement. Several attempt to define the movement and to place it in political and educational context. One paper reports statistics on its growth. Several sources delineate the movement's scope and forecast its future. Others attempt to define what skills are truly basic, and one offers advice to school boards contemplating back-to-basics programs for their districts. All these sources are indexed in ERIC. (Author)

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The Best of ERIC

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The Basics Controversy

1. **Amundson, Elden M.** "What Is the 'Back to Basics' Movement?" Paper presented at American Association of School Administrators annual meeting, Atlantic City, February 1976. 10 pages. ED 122 446.

Although Amundson's treatment of this subject is rather cursory, he does present a fairly balanced view of one of the chief underlying causes of the back-to-basics movement—the decline in student basic skills. And his perspective as a vice-president of the American Association of School Administrators is worth noting.

Amundson suggests that the back-to-basics movement "is a societal reaction to generalizations, excesses, misdirection, misunderstandings and in some instances, ill-advised philosophies and practices" in the schools. While educators can hardly be held responsible for all the ills besetting American education, there is certainly justification for many of the criticisms leveled against the schools by back-to-basics advocates. For example, the schools have been responsible for hiring far too many unprepared teachers whose own skills in basic language and arithmetic are pitifully inadequate.

Amundson cautions educators to beware of those who view the move to basics as "justification to limit the structure of the curriculum and thereby reduce school budgets." He advises educators to maintain their "commitment to concern for the whole child"and to remember that renewed emphasis on the basics will most probably require more funding, not less.

2. **Brodinsky, Ben.** "Back to the Basics: The Movement and Its Meaning." ***Phi Delta Kappan,*** 58, 7 (March 1977), pp. 522-27. EJ 153 638.

Brodinsky reviews the latest developments in the back-to-basics movement, along with examining some of its underlying causes and its impact on education.

Educators, Brodinsky contends, have countered "simplistic demands for the three Rs" by advancing "a new educational trinity: 1) minimal competency, 2) proficiency testing, 3) a performance-based curriculum." In addition to emphasis on the classic basic skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic), these three recent educational developments stress "life (or survival) skills"—skills necessary for personal development and for successful citizenship, family membership, and job-holding.

Even though Brodinsky does not draw a direct causal relationship between the pressure generated by back-to-basics advocates and the emergence of competency-based education (CBE), he does clearly imply that the two movements are closely related conceptually. And they are also closely related politically in many states that have mandated minimal competency or performance-based programs. All heavily emphasize testing as the foremost means of assuring competency in basic skills.

What will be the long-range effects of the back-to-basics and CBE emphasis on basic skills? Brodinsky states that it is possible that these educational developments will produce students more skilled in reading and computation, "and possibly even writing." The authority of the classroom teacher may be restored, and "even the most conservative of laymen may begin to value individualized instruction, since many plans call for teaching on a one-to-one basis."

The disadvantages that Brodinsky foresees are the increased emphasis on "testing, testing, testing," with the probable result that many teachers will teach the test and not the subject matter. But of even greater importance to many concerned educators is the possibility that public education is in the process of losing its "great generating power" by dehumanizing the learning process and "placing it under rote and autocracy."

3. **Brodinsky, Ben.** ***Defining the Basics of American Education. Fastback 95.*** Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1977. 47 pages. ED 145 573.

What are the basics of education? In this report of a conference of educators and educational leaders, Brodinsky presents the participants' attempts to answer this complex question. The meeting of forty educators, legislators, public school administrators, state and national agency leaders, and representatives from higher education was cooperatively sponsored by

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three private foundations. According to Brodinsky, the participants represented a wide variety of views, from fundamentalist to liberal.

Brodinsky divides the basics defined by conference participants into two major categories—"Fundamentals in Subject Matter" and "Fundamentals in Student Development."

Subject matter or curriculum basics include reading (participants favored phonics or "decoding" as the first, most fundamental skill, with equally strong emphasis on comprehension); communication (writing "for pleasure and self-satisfaction" is as important as writing to learn the "rules and mechanics" of communication); mathematics (basic computational skills "represent a starting point," but acquisition of problem-solving skills is even more essential, according to participants); and science (memorization of facts is secondary to development of abilities to question, to collect data, to test theories, and to analyze the applications of science).

The basics of student development, which participants regarded as just as important as curriculum basics, include the development of social and civic responsibility, health, economic capability, creativity, use of leisure time, humaneness, and positive self-concept.

How should local school officials respond to pressure from back-to-basics advocates? Conference participants generated a list of "tactical guidelines" relating to school district policy formation. "Don't overreact or underreact to criticism or demands of basics advocates," "Avoid sloganeering," "Don't leave the task of responding to the basics advocates to public relations 'spokespersons' or to specialists in subject matter," "Don't assume an adversary position," "Avoid quick or partial responses to demands for change in the schools," and "Listen to the basics advocates with sympathy. Invite them to express their views at board meetings."

A list of "cautions" for state legislatures and departments of education was also generated, including the caution that "states should avoid a bandwagon approach to minimum competency laws and mandates."

4. **DeTurk, Philip H.** "The Basics: Timeless or Mindless?" ***National Elementary Principal,*** 56, 5 (May/June 1977), pp. 51-54. EJ 158 776.

DeTurk argues that "unstructured education is never good education" and that the "whole fabric of teaching and learning, regardless of its philosophic design, must have a meaningful framework." Contrary to the claims of the back-to-basics advocates, a return to "the timeless traditions and eternal verities with which schooling practices have been blindly determined" would not provide the structure necessary for "good education," DeTurk maintains.

He cautions against the paranoia that sometimes characterizes the back-to-basics movement. Some back-to-basics advocates tend to see such disparate educational developments as team teaching, ungradedness, open classroom, program budgeting, and busing "as though they were all related and all branches of the same evil root." And he also cautions against seeing the schools as all-powerful shapers of society; "that we even suspect our schools as the guilty precursor of all our ills, or as the savior, is giving them more credit than they ever deserved."

DeTurk approves of the desire of parents to know what is going on in the schools and to be assured that their children are learning to read, write, and compute. But he believes that the methods used to bring about this "basic learning" must be determined by professional educators, not by the lay public, as back-to-basics supporters suggest.

5. **Donelson, Ken,** editor. ***Back-to-the-Basics in English Teaching.*** Tempe: Arizona English Teachers Association, 1976. Entire issue of ***Arizona English Bulletin,*** 18, 2 (February 1976), 157 pages. ED 117 739.

Thirty-one articles collected in this issue of ***Arizona English Bulletin*** contain the views of educators on the back-to-basics movement and its impact on the teaching of language and communication skills, as well as its impact on education in general. As Editor Donelson comments, these articles examine "that much-praised, much-maligned, much-used, much-misused, much-misunderstood term, 'basics'."

Several authors note the nebulous nature of "basics." Allan Dittmer, for example, points out that besides its current variety of applications in education, back to basics has been used recently to describe everything from religion to hamburgers. The result, according to Dittmer and others, is a rather appalling conceptual fuzziness.

The back-to-basics movement comes in for sharp criticism from some of the authors. Charles Weingartner, for example, maintains that the "simple-minded" notion that the three Rs are the only important basics "is congenial only to the kind of witless mentality that finds 'fundamentalism' of any kind a source . . . of reassuring misconceptions." While the other authors do not state their positions as vehemently as Weingartner, many agree with his criticism that the back-to-basics approach is oversimplified.

Other articles in this collection tackle the sticky problem of

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delineating the real basics of education, specifically, of language education. Bertrand Evans argues that the popular notion of "relevance" held by many back-to-basics advocates, as well as by some liberal, open educators, misdirects attention away from true basic skills and toward "the peripheral." The result is that the "relevantists," according to Evans, "are less interested, for example, in teaching children ***to read*** as a basic skill, than in teaching them to read road signs." Evans does not scorn the acquisition of such prosaic skills as competency-based education advocates usually propose. But he does maintain that the student possessing only these skills can hardly be considered well educated.

Lee Odell also condemns the superficial kind of relevance that leads educators to define the basics in very narrow and inadequate terms. He argues that reading, writing, and other language skills "are not the basics of a language arts program" or even of the language process itself. Instead, these skills are "manifestations of a set of intellectual processes" described by linguists and developmental psychologists. The back-to-basics approach does nothing to encourage the development of these underlying skills, according to Odell.

6. **Down, A. Graham.** "The Future of the Back-to-Basics Movement." Paper presented at National School Boards Association annual meeting, Houston, March 1977. 9 pages. ED 139 086.

Down lists four "hallmarks" of the back-to-basics movement. First, back-to-basics schools tend to emphasize student and teacher accountability and student academic achievement, as measured by standardized tests. Second, competency-based education reflects "the same kind of concern for measurement and assessment which characterizes the evaluation of student performance in the basic alternative elementary schools." Third, the back-to-basics movement is closely associated with the current reevaluation of the curricular innovations of the late 1960s and early 70s. And fourth, the growth of consumerism and public demands for financial accountability from the schools are definitely related to calls for a return to the basics.

As executive director of the Council for Basic Education, Down is obviously concerned with promoting the teaching of basic skills. But while he sees certain similarities between the council's goals and those of the back-to-basics movement, he is careful to delineate the differences. He notes that many back-to-basics schools, "shorn of their extracurricular extremes," such as "exaggerated dress and discipline codes," promote the kind of "structured curriculum" that the council endorses. But he also points out that, unlike some back-to-basics advocates, "the Council has never limited the basics to the Three R's," nor has it endorsed the nostalgic components of the back-to-basics movement.

Down foresees a further expansion of the movement because it is more than mere nostalgia for times past and because it addresses many of the public's current concerns about declining test scores and accountability.

7. "Look Back, But Don't Leap Back Yet; Some Tough Questions Await You." ***Updating School Board Policies,*** 8, 6 (June 1977), pp. 1-5. EJ 162 252.

Before leaping onto the back-to-basics bandwagon, school board members should ask themselves four central questions, according to this article.

First, what skills are basic "and are they the same for everyone?" Critics of the back-to-basics movement "argue that whatever was basic to schools twenty-five years ago may not be exactly what today's students need to cope with what lies in

their future."

Second, "do the basic schools actually boost achievement in basic skills?" The answer to this question is so far a qualified "yes." But the authors of this article point out that not only do basics schools attract highly motivated parents and students whose enthusiasm may well wear off as the newness of the idea passes, but that most of the students in these schools "probably would do well wherever they were."

Third, if higher test scores are what parents want, "will a stronger emphasis on basic skills in the regular instructional program—instead of a separate school—do just as well?" This article describes the Roswell, New Mexico, basic skills approach for instruction in all schools.

Fourth, what are the real reasons behind public pressure for back-to-basics schools? If friction and polarization characterize school district politics, then school officials can expect that conflict to pervade attempts to keep back-to-basics schools running smoothly, according to this article.

8. **National School Boards Association.** ***Back-to-Basics. NSBA Research Report 1978-1.*** Washington, D.C.: 1978. 41 pages. ED number not yet assigned.

The results of a 1977 survey of 786 school board members and administrators highlight this research report. Questioned about the back-to-basics movement at the annual National School Boards Association convention, the respondents generally reflected the public's positive attitude toward back to basics.

A majority of the board members polled agreed with the statement that "education standards have deteriorated; most schools today need to stress reading, writing, and math skills more than they do." Only 20 to 40 percent of the respondents considered subjects such as music, career education, driver education, literature, biology, or creative writing to be essential. Fewer than 9 percent agreed that "back-to-basics is a backward step in the growth of American education."

Two out of three board members said that their districts had taken or planned to take official action as a result of the back-to-basics movement. In many districts, the board members themselves first brought the back-to-basics issue before their boards. A majority of the respondents believes that back-to-basics will have an impact on their local school district within five years."

The authors conclude that, given the positive attitudes of both the general public and school board members toward back-to-basics issues, "the climate in education *is* changing."

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9. Schofield, Dee. ***Issues in Basic Education.*** NAESP School Leadership Digest Second Series, Number 12. ERIC/CEM Research Analysis Series, Number 27. Arlington, Virginia, and Eugene: National Association of Elementary School Principals, and ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, 1976. 31 pages. ED 128 873.

"The back-to-basics movement has a distinctive grass roots aura, unlike the liberal education movements of the 1960s, which were primarily the products of educators," according to Schofield. The result is that this movement is definitely political in tone and in substance, as this author notes.

Schofield points out that although not all supporters of the basics agree with the strictly fundamentalist approach to education, most back-to-basics schools share at least some conservative characteristics. Fundamentalists see education as the means of transmitting and preserving the values of the dominant culture, not as a means of critically examining or changing those values. Uniformity in behavior, in teaching method, and in subject matter is emphasized in fundamentalist education. And going back to basics is seen by many fundamentalists as a way to reduce school budgets by cutting out the so-called "frills."

The conservative cast to the back-to-basics movement has prompted some educators to react very defensively and charge that the fundamentalists are out to sabotage American education. But, as Schofield points out, "It is no more correct or enlightening for educators to condemn fundamentalists as being ignorant and backward than it is for back-to-basics advocates to condemn educators for undermining and destroying the American way of life."

In spite of the fact that the back-to-basics movement reflects a general swing toward conservatism, Schofield does not believe that fundamentalist, back-to-basics education will become the dominant form of education in America. As she states, "fundamentalist philosophy simply does not sit well with many parents and educators, who are not prepared to throw out all the educational innovations of the past decade."

10. Wellington, James K. "American Education: Its Failure and Its Future." ***Phi Delta Kappan,*** 58, 7 (March 1977), pp. 527-30. EJ 153 639.

"American education is failing," according to Wellington, a past member of the Scottsdale, Arizona, board of education. Wellington attributes this failure to two major factors. First, a lack of discipline in the home and family, "plus inconsistent administration of school discipline problems," have rendered school disciplinary procedures virtually meaningless. Second, "inconsistent grading standards" and grades that fail to reflect the student's true level of achievement have not only inspired the wrath of parents, but have caused great difficulty for students. Wellington cites examples of students who make good grades in high school, only to find themselves penalized in college by their deficiencies in basic skills.

A "fundamental," back-to-basics approach would remedy these two central problems, according to Wellington. He lists "five primary goals" of the fundamental school: (1) to teach basic reading, writing, speaking, spelling, and computation skills; (2) to teach students their history and heritage and "to reason in a logical and objective manner"; (3) to challenge each student to do his or her best; (4) to encourage accountability through testing and grading; and (5) "to reinforce parental teaching of citizenship, respect, discipline, and personal responsibility."

While Wellington is a staunch supporter of the "fundamental" school, he acknowledges that this form of traditionalist education is not for everyone. To accommodate the variety of needs and desires of parents and students, he advocates "that school districts adopt alternative schools." But for school districts that are unable to afford other forms of educational alternatives, the fundamental school should still be provided, since it "is an idea whose time again has come."

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